

Russian Foreign Minister's Pakistan Visit: Revamping Lost Ties

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It is once again proven that there is no permanent ally or enemy in the global political order, rather only permanent interests. Despite the repeated attempts of warming up bilateral ties in the past, historical legacies and over-reliance on the West had constrained progress in the bilateral Pakistan-Russia relations. Yet, surprisingly there is hardly any bilateral issue or dispute that divides the two countries. Contemporary regional dynamics and shifting strategic priorities has compelled Russia to reassert its presence in its sphere of influence and beyond. Thus, the recent visit of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to Pakistan could be seen as a ray of hope to re-invigorate the spirit of bilateral cooperation through diplomacy in multiple avenues.

The first visit by a Russian Foreign Minister to Pakistan in 9 years is itself a milestone in improving ties after a long and uneventful period. For the first time, both countries have chosen to strengthen the relationship in three areas – economy, security, and politics. Along with in-depth discussion on the war in Afghanistan, Sergey Lavrov and his counterpart Shah Mahmood Qureshi talked about strengthening trade with enhanced economic, energy and counter-terrorism cooperation.

In a nutshell, Sergey Lavrov's meetings with Prime Minister Imran Khan, S M Qureshi and Chief of Army Staff General Qamar Bajwa signals a simultaneous 'politico-defense-diplomatic' boost to the decades-long forgotten and complex Russo-Pak ties.

Russia has started factoring in and accepting regional actors through the lens of their individual significance. Along with developing a future defence market, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and peace process in Afghanistan offers significant economic and security incentives to the Kremlin. Adopting a more balanced approach towards South Asia would provide Russia greater chances of playing an active role in institutional capacity building, developing its energy sector and wider defense cooperation within the region. Thus, framing a more cooperative regional security and economic policy approach would be beneficial for Russian interests in the coming years.

In case of Pakistan, the revamping of its foreign policy that was earlier primarily rooted in geopolitics, would help the country embrace new opportunities from both its immediate neighbors and distant countries and reduce dependence on the United States. Based on this strategy, Pakistan is equally welcoming all major powers towards geo-economic regional cooperation.

Both countries can, hence, start cooperation in the above stated domains, with frequent meeting and exchange of delegations leading to concrete agreements expected in the coming years.

This could be a worrisome development for India. While the Russian Foreign Minister's visit raised hopes in Islamabad, it was seen suspiciously by India because it represents another failure of Indian ambitions of isolating Pakistan. According to the Indian media, the BJP-led government was unhappy that Lavrov's trip to India was followed with one to Pakistan as well. However, one cannot ignore the reality that India still retains an edge of being a longstanding major Russian defense partner and customer, which Moscow would not overlook in near times. On the other hand, the United States has been keeping a silent but watchful eye on such developments in South Asia for the time being, while the Biden Administration refines its policy towards the region.

The boost in Pakistan-Russia ties validates the former's crucial position in the region and highlights its growing geo-economic importance beyond its geostrategic significance due to the Afghan conflict. For Russia, it is beneficial to keep a balanced approach in its ties with China, India and now Pakistan to expand its regional influence vis-à-vis the United States. For Pakistan, enhancing friendly relations with more regional nations and world powers as well as exploring new opportunities for promoting its national interests is of vital importance in order to not only stabilize its economy, but also to improve its national security.

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